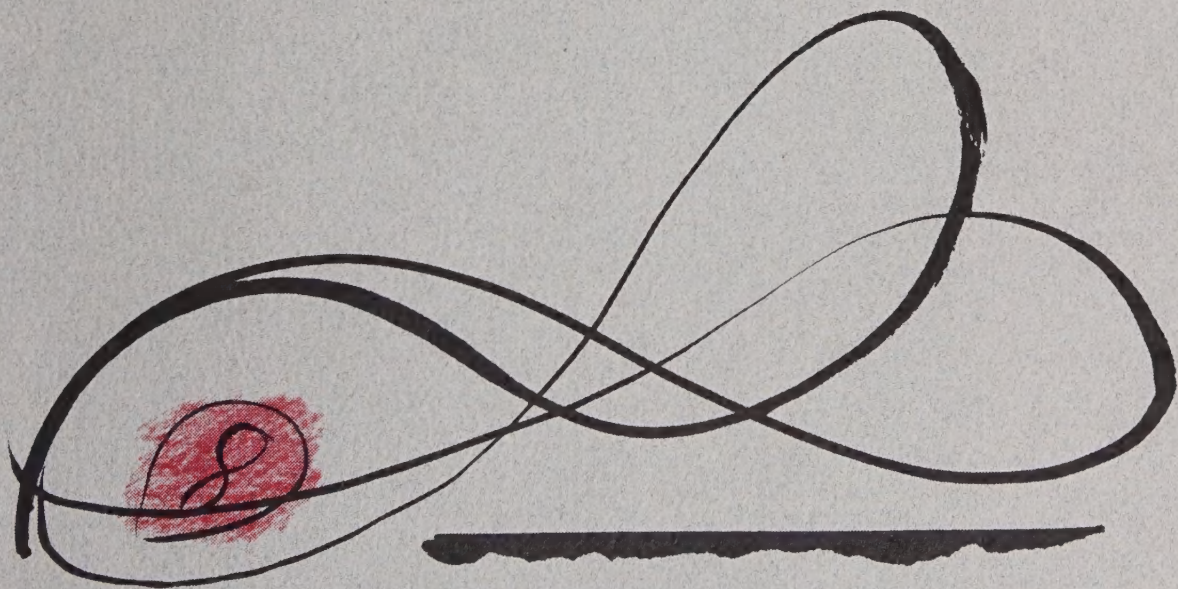


Rain





# RAIN

*SPRING 1995*





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photokinesis

The searching leaves have bent to their extreme  
And in that gesture now solidified  
Into a structure firm in its own right  
The breath of autumn stirs a trembling.  
Whispering with the season, I may ask  
If this momentum found the sun it sought  
Or if it helped the whole to summer's glow -  
Or, asking not, I may tell that I know:  
The searching leaves have bent to their extreme.  
The breath of autumn stirs a trembling.

pianoforte

With hands on keys and eyes on dots she falls  
Into a trance of sober, rainlike sound.  
Her ankle works brass, damper and sustain,  
And all the windows in the house stay closed.  
The hammers with their soft heads thud divine,  
The black and white peripheries turn gray,  
And in her knuckles pangs of birth fill air  
With all her children, dancers in lost time.  
With hands on keys and eyes on dots she feels  
Her heart, now open, now a tacit strain.

**Ark**

It was a cool, dry day  
When the strange boat landed -  
No horizon but water -  
Clouds and water.  
A jagged, hidden rock  
Held the keel, held tight  
The boat at last,  
While a mad assembly,  
All the creatures on the deck,  
Rushed in happy frenzy  
From mast to mizzen.

The land-view came then, slowly.  
The peak that held them  
Clearly showed. There would be,  
At last, a way to leave the boat -  
A way to step out onto land.

Two by two they'd come aboard -  
Two by two they'd leave.  
None knew where were paths  
To nests or lairs, nor where the paths  
To woodlands which were theirs,  
Nor meadows waiting for them.

Noah spoke.  
He wished them well:  
"It's your place now  
To fill the empty world  
To teeming. Leave the Ark!  
Take up your happy duty!"

Two wolves, both male,  
Two female lions,  
Held up their paws.  
"Ah, yes," said Noah.  
"The other four.  
You'll be there always,  
Two and two,  
In every generation.  
Go forth now,  
And be loving."

Then two by two  
All left the boat,  
Hand holding hand,  
Paw touching paw,  
Claw claw, and  
Wing to Wing.

### **Cows Walking on Water**

The river curves and far down  
a dozen cows begin walking  
on water. They move slowly  
as if to avoid frightening  
the mirrored herd at their feet.  
Slowly, the lowered heads dip  
and drink their watery twins.  
Unconcerned with miracles,  
they fail to think it strange  
their mirrored feet hold them  
from sinking. It is miracle enough  
the morning sun is warming  
their hides, and maybe I could go  
and find a hidden ledge below  
the surface holding them,  
but this is their miracle,  
and the sun is warming my skin.



**This Fabric of Water**

A cloud above  
the mountain spills  
down into a sheet of rain  
through the green forest of trees  
then ends suddenly as  
a curtain of mist  
across a brown valley  
its grasses sleeping  
deep in the winter  
not yet dreaming  
of those warm days  
but lost somewhere  
between sleep  
and yearning  
waiting, waiting  
for the sun's  
new urging.  
Beneath this somnolence  
ribbons of water  
move toward  
more of their kind  
then spring earthside  
into rivulets, into streams  
into rivers, large and quiet  
garments ocean bound.

**Thinks About It**

Sometimes  
poetry is  
a flashlight, fixed  
on the dark corner of a room.

Sometimes  
it's a  
little river, vagrant  
through loose rock and moss.

Often  
neither  
stare nor gurgle  
tells the story, and

sometimes  
it all just  
smells so good,  
the softer ground called earth.

## **Grafting**

Into the center of a wild pear  
Daddy grafted Bartlett, Anjou and Comice.  
He bred big chickens  
until he had achieved  
fourteen pound birds  
roosters large as turkeys  
but true chickens  
clucking and scratching  
and looking for great bugs.  
My sisters and I snapped our gum  
and painted our toenails  
as he went out to his work.

## **Wet Aloe Plants**

My aloe plant died. It's been a while since my aloe plant died. I'm sitting on the window sill with a long skirt flowing over my legs, the same window sill my aloe plant used to sit on. I didn't notice my aloe plant was dead until I needed it. Now it's in the freezer, it's been there for a while.

I was boiling spaghetti noodles for myself when I burned the insides of my wrists and my forearms. After I had burned myself I got a knife and went to go sacrifice a limb of my aloe plant. Aloe plants are forgiving of those kinds of things. As I approached my aloe plant on the window sill, I started feeling guilty about sacrificing its limb, but I had a burn, and that is what aloe plants are for.

Point being, I reached my poor plant and found it oddly brown colored, stiff, and quite definitely dead. I tried to salvage some of the aloe, a futile attempt. I turned my back to the plant and stood, looking at my wrists. They were getting puffy and red now, terribly red. I went for a walk. It wasn't dark yet, just dim enough for me to be able to see into the windows of lighted rooms better than windows of unlit rooms. It wasn't long before I saw an aloe plant in the window of an old house. Beyond the plant, the television was on. An elderly man was slowly walking through the room. I could see he was saying something, but what or to whom I could not tell. He was speaking affectionately to someone in the next room.

I started walking home. There are no elevators in my building. The building is really old. My apartment is on the third floor. It was an attic at one time. It's small, and all my piles of me look wonderful in it. I never lock my door. What I have would mean nothing to anybody else.

I eventually found my way to the freezer. If I couldn't use aloe, maybe ice would help. At least the ice would dull the pain. I don't really have television, I have a small screen with no color capabilities connected to a box. On the other end of this box is an antenna. I've shaken this box, I've dropped it, poured beverages on it occasionally, but still the quality of the television has not dropped. I'm almost sure there is nothing in this box. It picks up two channels, both of them fuzzy. One more fuzzy than the other. But it gives me something to look at when I'm in between things. Lately I've always been between things.

I had been sitting with my legs crossed yoga style, my arms out on the arms of the chair, balancing ice on each wrist looking at my little television. I felt very self-



conscious of the fact that if any one were to walk in that door of mine I would have to explain myself, and I didn't even know how I had gotten to that point. I nodded off before I had to explain anything. The ice melted though. It soaked the chair and me. I soon woke to find myself more miserable than when I'd fallen asleep. I unplugged the television (the only way I had figured how to turn the thing off) and went to bed, which is actually a couch in the corner. The best pain reliever I've ever found is sleep. I dreamt about that old man with the aloe plant in the window, the aloe plant seemed a lot bigger in the dream. Bigger than the window, almost a barrier.

I woke up with someone shouting in the background. At first I thought it was part of the dream but after a minute of staring, I found Davis, my brother, was in my apartment, watching television. He had been sitting in the wet chair and had finally realized how cold it was. He would be rude enough to wake me up like that. He's young, ignorant, thinks he is actually going somewhere and I would love to be him. He stops by every once in a while. He's a morning person, our family isn't very morning oriented, and they've never been tolerant, so he hangs out here in the mornings. From the size of the wet spot on his back I guessed he had been sitting in that chair for quite some time.

He turned slowly, seeing if he had woke me up.

"Yes, you woke me up."

"Sorry," he started to explain himself.

"Yeah... "

"What happened to the plant that Grandma gave you?" My brother is observant. Too observant.

"Killed it with Drano," was my response, along with leaving the room. Our Grandmother had given us those. In fact she gave all her Grandchildren aloe vera plants.

"Mmmmmmmmm..."

"Don't just 'mmm', you sound like Mom. You know I forgot to water it, why did you ask, you knew." I talked around the corner of the bathroom. I was staring at myself in the mirror. Davis and I had both received aloe plants for Christmas a while ago. It was right before I left, it was the first thing I took with me when I got this apartment. Davis was young then, maybe fourteen, but he knew why I was leaving. As I thought about this I felt bad about the comment I had just made. I moved the mirror so I could see him. He was trying to look at the spot on his back from sitting on the wet chair. He was turning in circles.

"Yeah, I knew." He mumbled, "I was just thinking maybe there was a fungus and that is why mine died too. I thought that was what happened to mine."

"Wait," I interrupted, practically jumping through the door to be able to see him. "You killed yours off too?" I almost expected my brother to kill off his aloe vera plant, he didn't know any better. For me to let a plant like that die, that was different. I was supposed to be responsible, he was supposed to be the flake. That aloe plant was something I could fall back on but not always need. My brother expects things like that to be around. He doesn't realize he won't always be able to go home.

"Why is my back wet?" Davis asked slowly.

"Because my aloe plant died," I answered.

\* \* \*

Two days after this my mother called, cold and demanding that I send Davis home. I had of course no idea where he was. I told her this and she insisted he was here. She said she does not want him here, that he's absorbing my life-style. I hung up.

This is when I put the aloe plant in the freezer. I hadn't spoken to my mother for almost a year, I've developed an indifference. But not an effective one. My wrist constantly ached now. The ice was purely aesthetic, no healing capabilities.

Davis showed up late that night. He was dripping wet, standing in front of the door. He actually knocked on the door. My door has a little half sphere of glass toward the top, I could tell it was Davis, I asked him through the door why didn't he just come in. He didn't answer, just stood there indifferent to whether the door would be opened or not. I opened the door to find him standing there with an aloe plant in his hand. He had been holding a hat on top of it so it would not get too wet in the rain.

He thrust the plant at me, I couldn't take it. "Why did you do this, you know I wouldn't be able to keep it alive."

"Went all over trying to find one of these things, found one though. And you were keeping the plant in the window, that's a pretty bright window isn't it?"

"So..."

"You have to put it here, so it won't get too much light," he said as he placed it on top of the small table, next to the television. The plant was bigger than the television but it seemed to balance fine. He plugged the television in, sat down in the now dry chair, getting it wet, and asked casually, "Can I stay here tonight? It is really wet, Mom doesn't know where I've been all day, I don't want to go home yet."

I couldn't believe he asked me that, he could go home, Mom wasn't really mad at him. Not as mad as Mom has been at me for the last year. "You don't want to be here."

"Yes, I do."

"No Davis, you don't. You don't realize what you are saying."

"Mom called didn't she, that is what she always says. I'm not ashamed of you like she is, how could you think... "

"She's ashamed?"

My mother is cold and unhealing, I'm burnt like a desert, and my brother is wet.

I'm sitting in the window sill, looking down at the street. Davis is supposed to take me to the store today. I'm waiting for a medium. The chair is still wet.





## **Rain Forest**

You disappeared through a moss lace arch.  
I was slower, lowering myself close to the ground.  
I touched a mushroom and small pearls of moisture  
spread like a watercolor wash.  
When I entered the forest through the same  
fragile door, you leaped from among the trees,  
Puck with a pale pink and green bark mask, laughing,  
your words the language of an old growth world.

You offered me the bark,  
and I became a girl in a night gown  
walking lightly through a dusty attic  
holding the papier-mâché mask  
like a child carries a ragdoll by the arm.

I carried the mask until my arm ached  
then hung it on a limb and began to fly.  
My free hand reached yours.  
Our legs sunk in tree rot, and ferns grew around our ears.  
We crawled on high canopies of fallen cedars  
always sinking to the knees in new life.  
Hiding in a hemlock, I watched you run circles,  
jumping from log to log, hands in pockets,  
then balancing on goat feet.

You took me through a rabbit hole,  
an underworld of roots  
where the warm blooded mammals sleep.  
And I ran from you.

You walked as if your hand was a compass,  
and I followed songs and colors, weaving away  
and back with no intention of ever leaving.  
I didn't want to follow you.  
Find me. Find me. I'm here.  
Now I'm here.

We called to each other's new names,  
our voices rising like silver dust  
into the treetops which covered the sky,  
once together in the green belly of the forest,  
a circle of bright moss,  
again losing each other.

Come together, run away, come together,  
run, a game played by every pair of creatures,  
played at night when the eyes emerge  
from dark tree root homes.

We wiped sap on each other's faces,  
and you said there should be fairies.  
I said, "We are the fairies."

**A spider's web**

They stand together  
at a certain distance  
bridged by a love that  
is a spider's web.

Amazing threads  
though barely tickling her  
skin, paralyze her will.  
She's afraid to move,  
holds cautiously still  
when she yearns to  
beat out the poison.

So she waits,  
dumb and patient,  
for love to grow when  
nothing feeds it but  
strings of tears,  
those false dewdrops  
that cunningly bend light.

**bedfellow**

they sprawled entangled  
asking banal questions  
and neither listened for answers,  
but praised themselves  
for forcing the other to elaborate

she spoke then  
for it didn't matter,  
"you don't care anything for me,  
do you?"

he rounded the edges  
of the sharp-cornered question,  
but later  
when he laughed,  
she knew that he was laughing at her  
for asking a question of such insignificance.

and she was not hurt,  
she felt nothing for him either.  
she returned the gesture

maybe the chuckle should have caused pain,  
but it didn't.  
she wanted it to  
she



wished it had

and later she cried  
for laughing back  
and for her callousness  
but she was not sad,  
for the next day  
she cried for a different reason  
and she put on her shoes,  
same as always

### Civil Disobedience

I will not follow your stiff, aggrieved,  
angry back all the way home.  
I'll walk right on Exchange, left on Ninth,  
turn twice more to Harrison.

I know you will head straight up Tenth,  
turn only when you get on Harrison.  
You are always direct, unyielding.  
You burn me up, you are so self-righteous.

Just because I couldn't figure out why  
the extra red light on the dash came on  
while you finished reading your book  
in the library

The battery is dead  
We have to walk - big deal  
I walk all over town when you have the keys  
Besides, it's even my car!

Good thing I have a sense of humor.  
Get your own damned dinner.

**Dirt**

I was on the highway again last night  
Kicking the dirt on the side of the road  
Straight and clean between two singularities  
She stood behind me waving goodbye  
I just stared out the window of the Greyhound  
Watching her go  
I dream of the highway and I dream of the bus  
I dream of diesel and know  
The road never lied to me  
I whisper  
To myself  
The lies I enjoy the most  
And when I'm done  
Lying  
Talking  
Speaking  
Writing  
Smoking  
Drinking  
Living  
Dying  
I find myself  
On the highway  
Kicking the dirt on the side of the road

*John Paul Barrett*

**Hearts**

She glides silently  
Through the jungle.  
A basket of hearts  
Hangs from her waist.  
Most are dried.  
Some ooze dark liquid.  
One still beats.

**Her choice**

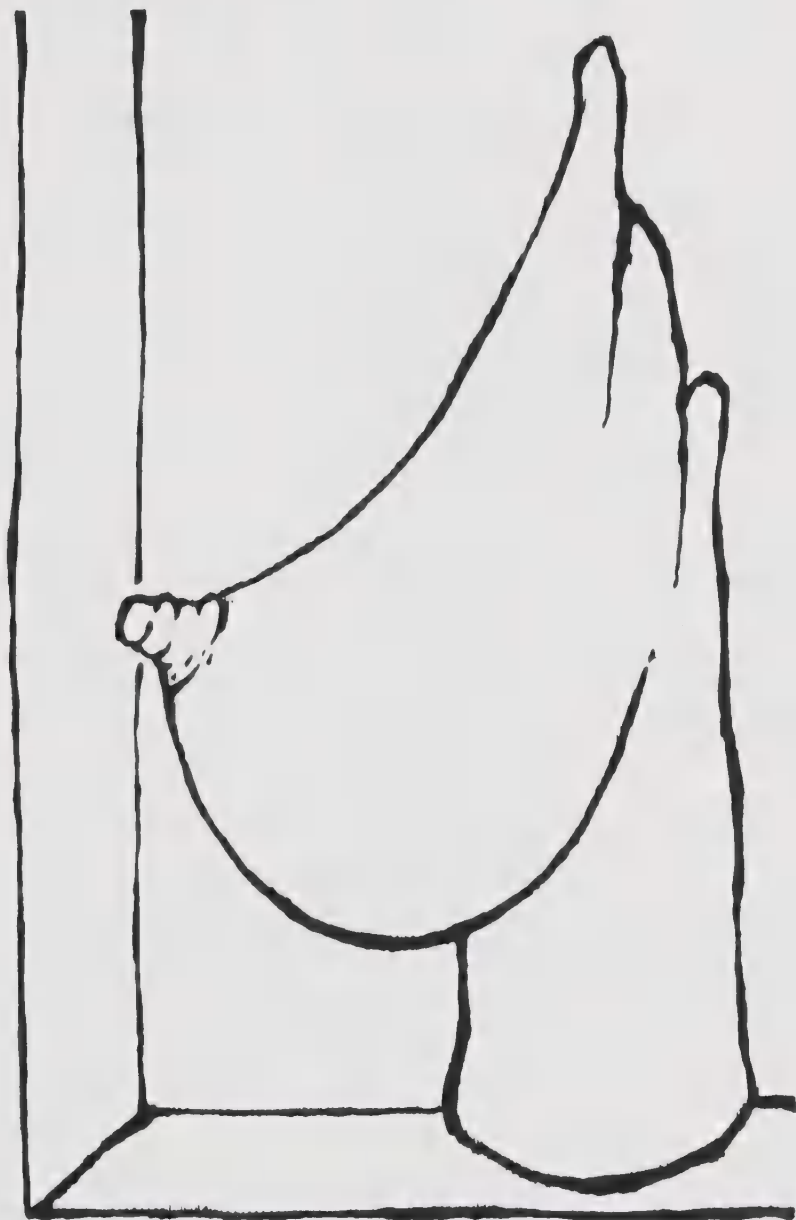
Hugging the encumbrance of craziness, she  
had taken it gradually on -  
letting it web around her like fluff from  
moss as old cupboards hold lint and crumbs  
and sock drawers smell musty. The light  
in the room mantled down, turned itself  
lower and lower like the gas lamps.

Sometimes - she thought she could hear him  
behind the wood shed, stumbling around, or saw  
pieces of his face blearing past the mirror  
cracking on the pantry door.

Today, her stockings looked strange to her  
hanging off the line in the kitchen  
she'd strung from an old kite  
she found dismantled in her yard -  
a gift from Heaven she thought - having  
been thinking a string would help  
to hang the few things she still chose  
to wash.

Now in the twilight dusk they seemed  
like monkey arms and hands that might  
grab her if she came too close -  
ducking under, she got a drink at the kitchen  
faucet, took a broom from the floor and  
beat them to death till they were  
shreds -

"I'll show you," she said,  
"You can't do that to me anymore."





**Just Another Day**

Beerdometer on full  
    tanked again  
wife screaming  
    loaded gun  
bullets flying  
steel hate tips  
baby sleeping in his crib  
    nothing said  
is worth a tear  
same old, same old  
    everyday  
    No job  
No money  
    No diapers  
No food  
    BOTH NO GOOD  
silent sighs  
good little housewife  
the war ends  
    Dishonorable Discharge  
tank full again.

## **The Man Who Loved Brubeck**

The first time Hank beat his wife was the night of the Dave Brubeck concert. He missed the whole first set of the performance, and the second ticket went entirely to waste.

He felt good that afternoon, despite the cold. Driving the thirty miles home from work in the leaky Mustang ragtop was miserable in cold weather, but since the back window had been broken out, it was frozen hell in that car at forty miles an hour.

The rear window had shattered on her twenty-fifth birthday, when he'd tried to carry a keg of Coors loose in the back. God damn it. He'd been so furious about the broken window, he'd missed the party for three or four hours at the Blue Note or somewhere. He'd come home to an almost empty house, the lingering odor of birthday-Columbian, the ruins of a cake, and a silent twenty-five year old wife. But Hank was a lover, and he'd told her something he eventually got her to believe, and that night they'd got the colored lights going pretty good.

He felt good that afternoon, savoring the anticipation of lazy, bluesy jazz on the cold trip home. In his pocket was his hand-tooled wallet with the long-horned bull worked in three colors. In the wallet next to the Brubeck concert tickets in the transparent sheaths for photos and credit cards, were his wife's high school graduation picture, a snapshot of Timmy in the bathtub, and a single brown curl of Pearl's pubic hair. Pearl was his boss's loud and lonely wife. His wallet trophy, he bragged to the boys at the Blue Note, he'd found between his teeth.

He felt good that afternoon, having wallowed through a long lunch in the general location of the origin of that wallet trophy. He smiled at the ease and convenience of the noon-time dates he'd been making for nearly a year now. Just in and out, he told the boys. She never complained that he didn't call, never smelled of Pine-Sol, never asked for money. In fact, she almost never talked at all. Their encounters barely interrupted her routine of Victoria Holt, Jane Fonda, mai tais, and appointments for having her roots done and her nails sculpted. Three times a week, just after Oprah, the boss's wife gave Hank a drink and a soulless and thoroughly satisfying fuck. A nooner. Hank was, as he said, just in and out.

He felt good that afternoon, having received his weekly blessing from his mother. He called her every Friday from the silo plant to hear her litany of praise: what a good provider for his family he was, how that little wife of his had no idea just how

lucky she was, what a good daddy he was to Timmy, and always at the end of the conversation, how God knew she should have been so blessed to find such a man. "And I love you too, Ma," he'd said into the phone, hanging up before she could ask again about that funny noise her El Dorado was making. Hank had had to do more and more for his mother since his father died. Not that he missed the old man at all, but she was really getting to be a drag.

Halfway home, Hank reined the old Mustang into the Indian Lakes Shopping Mall. Alternately beating his fingers against his denim thighs and clamping them in his armpits, the tall, lean man made his way through a gallery of mall stores: Halls, Pet Pavilion, Waldenbooks, Junque Jewelry, Vision Optical, Grandma's Cookies, Lerner's, Mall Clip 'N' Curl, Soundtown, Hickory Farms. He lingered at the window of Parklane Hosiery over a black lace bustier and matching garterbelt with tiny red bows. Removing his hat, he negotiated the purchase of the "busty-er" and belt and jammed the pink paper sack deep in the side pocket of his shearling jacket. The thought of all of round, ample Pearl packed into that little scrap of lace stretched his jeans a little.

At the end of the mall's skylit avenue of potted trees and philodendrons, Hank veered into Volume Shoes. In the display in seven colors were the rubber-toed canvas tennis shoes May always admired. Soiled Stetson in hand, he winked at the schoolgirl clerk. "Size seven and a half blue, Angelface." She grinned and glanced at the ceiling, folding her arms across her chest.

Hank dropped off the shoebox at Wrap-A-Rama, ordering plain white paper, no card, and pointed the toes of his Tony Lamas in the direction of the Drovers. With its plastic Western shopping mall motif of wagon-bows, barbed-wire displays, trail maps, and spurs, the Drovers wasn't exactly the Blue Note, but shopping always gave Hank the cotton-mouth. Beau would have hated this place, too. He'd worked with Beau at Butler until they were both brought up on charges of theft of tools and materials at the silo manufacturing site. Facing serious sentencing from a judge weary of their delinquencies, both Beau and Hank, boys then, had opted for a tour in Viet Nam. It was in Southeast Asia, really, that Beau had taught his buddy to love bootleg Brubeck from the States. He drank off two Coors listening to some fool yodeling "The Lonesome Cattle Call" on the jukebox. He left the bartender no tip except that he ought to play something besides "that ass-aching cowboy crap."

The freezing wind bit hard at Hank's ears beneath his hat brim as he folded his lengthy frame into the decrepit once-blue Mustang. He gunned the engine and exhaust belched through the broken rear window. He was fond of telling the boys at the Blue Note that

it was a wonder this old hoss hadn't killed him yet. He tossed the white-wrapped box of tennis shoes on the torn bucket seat beside him, lit an unfiltered Lucky Strike, and delicately eased Brubeck's "Take Five" into the tape deck under the dash. Feeling the beers oiling his shoulders and hips, he drew on leather gloves and pulled onto the interstate.

He felt good that afternoon, a jazz concert and his wife's twenty-sixth birthday. May didn't care much one way or the other for Brubeck, but he knew that after the concert, with a few birthday margaritas and maybe some good smoke in her, maybe he'd be able to get those colored lights going again for a change. Sex with his wife hadn't been quite the same in the last couple of years. Not the way it had been in the back of the Mustang on hot summer nights outside the ballpark or the Blue Note before they were married. Back before Timmy. Back when they couldn't wait to have each other. Now, he didn't know what the hell was wrong with her. Tonight, though, tonight was going to be good.

Hank put the pedal to the metal and burned the remaining miles home. Turning off the county blacktop onto the long driveway to the house, the Mustang's tires threw gravel on Timmy's yellow banana bike lying like a roadkill in the frozen crabgrass. Along the line of the patched roof a single strand of ancient Christmas lights rusted. In the sideyard a 1949 International Harvester pickup mouldered in metallic silence on cement blocks. The screen over the front door bellied out into a frayed rip in the lower panel. Hank worked the key loosely in the lock and kicked the door open with the toe of his boot, leaving yet another dark strike mark there. He flicked a Lucky butt into a soiled crust of old snow. It was too cold even to sizzle.

Inside, the first thing that struck him was the silence of the television. No Phil Donahue today. No station KRDO playing the country tunes of your life. No smell of spaghetti or chicken or potatoes frying. Timmy's transformers lay on the nappy carpet paralyzed in battle against two half-naked G.I. Joes with bazookas. Hank dropped the wrapped box on the littered coffee table and shrugged out of the shearling jacket. He wore a blue plaid wool shirt and a leather belt with a sunflower buckle. On the back between the loops, his belt said, "Wichita: Air Capital." He took a tentative step deeper into the room, licking his lips.

The door to the kitchen opened without warning or sound until its glass knob struck the dining room wall with such force that a small chip of the painted plaster dropped from the scarred wall. May wore Hank's First National Bank baseball jersey, Levis, and slippers with rabbit ears.



"You son of a bitch." She said it low and cold and flattened out, and Hank remembered a badger he'd cornered and killed by the railroad tracks one winter.

"What?" The same response he'd been giving his mother and every teacher, bouncer, and cop he'd come up against for the past thirty-some years.

May held up a creased photo snapped at an after-hours gun club party. Glassy-eyed Hank, his hat back on his head, laughed into the camera with one arm around a dark-haired woman in her panties.

"What?" Hank spread his fingers, palms up, the shrug more studied than before.

May rumbled into the living room, gathering speed. She bent the snapshot and fired it, point blank, into Hank's rapidly closing face. He swiped the air before his eyes. "How could you do this thing? Your Douglas Avenue whores are one thing, but Melissa, Melissa in her panties - was my friend!"

"Honey, that was over a long time ago. She's nothing to me, never was. Listen to me now, baby." Hank reached for her sobbing shoulders and pulled her to him. She replied with a fisted blow to his right collarbone. "Goddammit, that hurt!" He grabbed for her jersey as she twisted away from him; he caught a handful of sparrow-colored hair. She screamed in sudden pain and escaped to the bathroom, slamming the door and narrowly missing his fingers.

Though furious, the woman was slight, and the struggle to keep the bathroom door closed was brief. "Just talk to me, May-baby, talk to me a minute." Hank seized his wife's thin wrists and held them behind her back. His hard chest butted into hers and the scent of Brut cologne and Lucky Strikes broke over her. She backed blindly across wet tiles. Her bunny-slippered foot turned up the edge of the bathmat and she fell backwards across the edge of the tub. The penguin shower curtain tore loose from its rod as Hank grabbed her arm to break the violent urge of gravity on his wife's body.

Somewhere upstairs, Timmy began to howl.

Crumpled in the bottom of the cold tub, she jerked her arm away and flailed without seeing, striking him hard in the Adam's apple.

"Bitch!" He slapped her face, first right, then left, numb to the pain of his fingers' smack against the porcelain. She was screaming now, hysterical. He snatched at her sagging shoulders and hauled her up, her forehead just below the hairline scraping against the unforgiving faucet. Red seeped from her left nostril and gathered in the scrape-mark. He jerked her to her feet, shouting into her face. May cowered, covered her face with her hands, shrieking. Hank stripped the jersey from her convulsing chest, unzipped her jeans and yanked them to her knees. "Shut up! Just shut the fuck up a

minute, will you? May-baby, shut up, please! Please, oh, please, just shut up!" With a ragged groan, he smeared snot and outraged tears on his woolen sleeve. He grabbed her forearms and rattled her, then shook her, then shook her harder and harder, until her head struck the sea-foam green tiles behind her - once, twice, three times. The screaming stopped and May collapsed in a shuddering heap.

For a moment there was only the sound of Hank's panting sobs. Then May struggled to heave herself up on the edge of the tub. Hank struck a terrible blow to the back of her neck, just where her bird-brown hair curled. She lay quietly in the bottom of the bathtub. Hank leaned both hands against the towel rack and watched his wife's naked shiver.

He dried his face and blew his nose on Timmy's Star Wars towel and, twisting the lever to cold, turned the shower full blast on his wife.

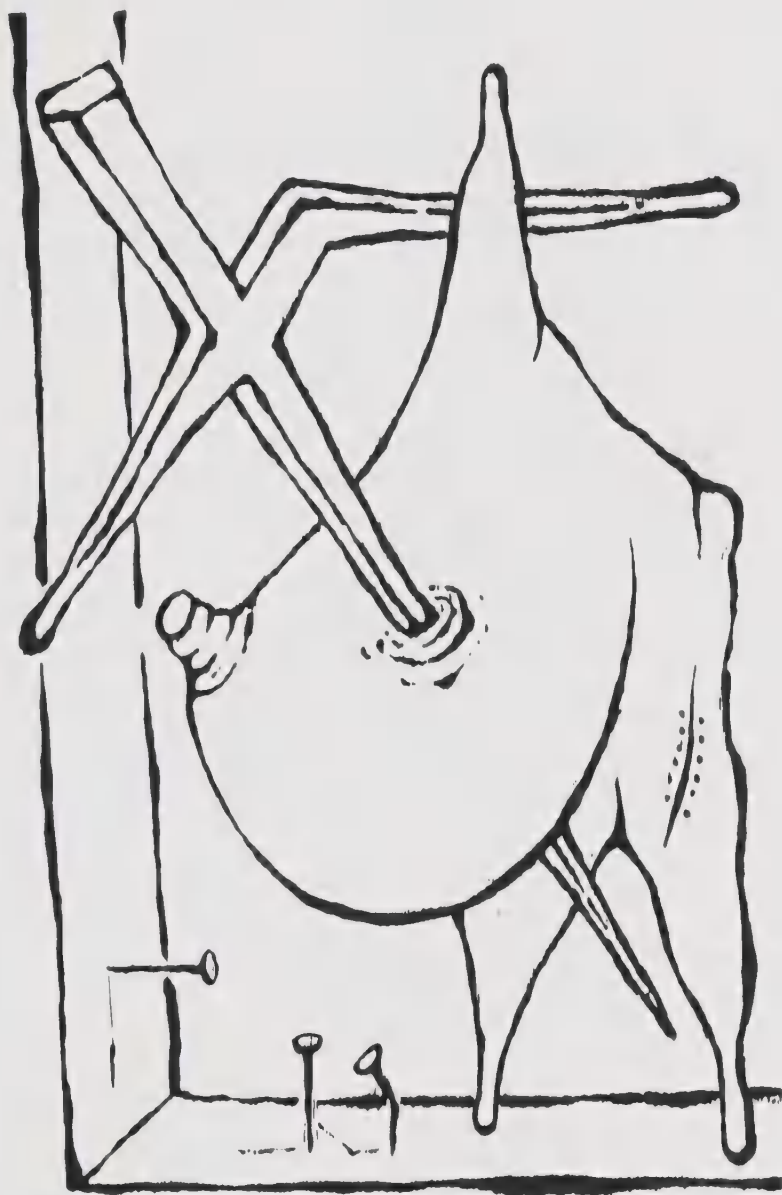
The shower ran while Hank changed his shirt and combed his hair. A deepening pool formed on the curling tiles beside the tub. It was still running when the Mustang sprayed gravel in the driveway. Hank got there in time to see more than half of the Brubeck concert.

At exactly 4:21 a.m. Hank came in, boots in hand. His purpling wife lay in bed, dry-eyed and staring. Hank knelt beside the bed and cried and kissed her and took her so, so sweetly, but May did not speak or move and there were no colored lights.



**The Break**

The bone snapped  
clean  
like a salted cracker  
or finger and thumb  
rubbed together like  
crickets'  
legs.  
A crack  
that pierced the air  
when what was once one  
now is two.  
The severing  
into a pair  
that which should  
have stayed whole,  
of a piece,  
a thing in and of  
itself  
entirely  
transpired.



**dead fish**

she holds his hand  
like it's a dead fish,  
the marble eyes cold  
with the same slime  
that coats the scales

the spines on his fintips,  
they are claw-like,  
needle-like,  
and caress like  
slips of a razor

but when she is alone  
she misses his touch,  
she feels the heat  
of infection and  
calls it love

## **The Fish**

A cold, slick fish slid through Mrs. Anders' pond behind her house. It was a silent fish, slipping icily through the muddied turquoise water; gleaning its body around the decayed stone on the pool; gleaming in the pale, sick sun when it skimmed the skin of the water's surface.

Mrs. Anders stood at the window and looked at the pond. Far away from her, buried deep under the earth, the fish swam silently. A cold, silvery flash of light came from the pond each time the nauseous sun struck the fish.

The pool was rotting, filled with dying and putrifying things. The water was dank and frigid, thick with webs of sea slime and mold and filth. No insects would breed there. No birds drank or bathed there. No living thing breathed there. Except the fish.

Mrs. Anders watched the decaying sun drift behind sad clouds; the yard falling into shades of charred yellow and grey. A crow hackled and the fish swam on, cold as steel and knives in the dying pond. Mrs. Anders turned away.

The fish glides on beneath the thick, grimy film of the pool; cold and silver and hard down there. Slipping its slick scales, curving its icy fins. Mrs. Anders has barred the door to the yard. Don't go there.

### **Emptying Each Day**

The light in my closet  
fills slowly with brown water.  
Each day it rises,  
and each day  
I mark the things I've lost  
like a parent measures a child's height  
and marks the wall.  
Upstairs a small girl stomps her feet.  
Her mother is at the sink.  
I know this because  
water is dripping from the ceiling  
around the rim of the light fixture.  
I remember a fish I once had,  
how the water in the bowl turned brown  
and the fish died.  
I stare at the inverted fish bowl  
in my closet filling  
with the sludge from old pipes.  
The girl upstairs shrieks.  
There is never enough attention.  
Her mother works too much.  
She's always too tired to play.  
Her father is gone,  
and there are too many people  
coming and going into her long days.  
I am far from home.  
Sometimes I see the child  
peeking in my windows.  
I'm empty inside.

**Ground**

You know how  
always you look  
for something  
just some  
one thing

that you count on?  
You know it's  
fiction  
but you do it anyway.

True in  
any direction

the sky.



**the end of april as we know it**

there was a time not too long ago  
maybe even last year  
when i could go on a jog with bill and feel  
like when i picked my left foot up and  
when i brought it down  
the world would be there to catch it  
just like every other  
stride i had taken before.  
but now i'm not so sure.  
everything is different you know  
and i don't think it's just me  
i really think everything is different now.

yesterday i wanted to live on a boat  
and today i called some college about some program  
and bill might be taking off with some woman too.  
what's going on?

i do know this and this is all, i guess.  
you are here in front of me  
and no matter if the world leaves my  
left foot hanging in the air  
you are here in front of me.

**Where is it?**

While she was looking a crow  
bristled by  
scattering rain  
petals from wet pine branches reaching  
over up the roof to the eyes  
of space windows  
set in the head of the house to blink  
and yawn. Sun and moon taking turns rubbing  
light on the glass shining up  
the polish - like an apple on a sleeve.

Seeing a yellow fire hydrant, and going on  
up the road, looking at squared gardens far below  
in neighbors' yards a fire hose  
would not reach to -  
and remembered the lot line next door was not  
clearly defined, though the guy wire  
painted yellow, too,  
ought to be enough to guide you  
to this place,  
holding up a totem pole of connection,  
wiring words in tandem -

and, she, looked for messages  
to appear - plucked like live sparrows,  
falling off the line.

**1976 Inside 1994**

And there is the woman sleeping  
under the cloud of your breath, nape  
of her neck releasing  
the slow bloom of bicentennial fireworks  
as you stood alone eighteen years earlier,  
marked America's big day on your brain calendar,  
those bullet-less tracers  
equaling years on the sky's smoldering dome.

It was the edge of the world and you fell in.

Where would you be in ten years?  
In twenty? Or a thousand fourth of Julys?  
You didn't salute the presidents  
or trace the curves of John Hancock's flourish.  
You didn't honor the bayfront reverie  
of loud chicks and pony kegs, fishermen on the make,  
the blue collar gospel's tireless revival.  
You did what a kid does, stunned by his own capacity  
to question, you rocked your imagination to life,  
wetted your lips, gazed into the world  
that would become your own face.

But now you are a man,  
capable of loving and fucking, welling up a meanness  
that could scare the world's cruelest animals.  
You touch her. She touches you back.  
It's simple. You learn love in this light,  
you learn loss. No purple fireworks.  
Just the world leaping that great space,  
the one between you and you.

## Blue Boots Willy

He's got these really great boots, blue like an oil-dipped seagull belly-up in a tidal pool. They were a gift from his daddy back in 1963, the year he turned sixteen and the year Sally Beesley kicked his shin so hard they never did straighten it out. So now Willy walks like a three-legged duck, with his third step a soft thump as the boot upper folds into the floor. You want to tell him to pull the boot on all the way.

Willy got hired out of high school as a printer in the wire-bound box factory, not that he had any experience as a printer and not that any half-wit couldn't have done the job just as well, but it was Willy they hired. Some folks felt sorry for him, almost like there was a swirl of violin music around his head. Almost like he was famous, which is pretty common in a small town. You couldn't watch him walk without either laughing or wincing, so he got a little of the good and a little of the bad when it came to how folks treated him. He got a job, which was more than you could say for most of his graduating class.

Willy's printing press was an ancient hand-cranked affair with a big steel drum that spit out slats of cheap fir imprinted with interesting things like *Celery*, or *Oregon Broccoli*, or *Tammy's Taters*, or *For Military Consumption Only*, or *California Artichokes*, or *Melons-Unsorted Green*. Not every box had to have a label slat, but the most important ones did, and those were the ones Willy got to work on. During the summer he got a helper, usually some pimply-faced kid who wasn't even old enough to remember the sixties and was embarrassed to be bossed around by Willy. Most of them lasted about a week, because once Willy got them shop broke they'd be moved to one of the bundling tables at the end of the line where they could put their hormones to good use. One kid practically had to be dragged into the printing loft by the foreman because he was so PO'd about having to work with a gimp on the first day. Willy told him dragging his feet was cool, 'cuz that meant they probably had lots in common. But mostly, Willy didn't care who he got to help him, he treated them all the same. He'd smile his goony smile and tell stories about love-ins he never went to and rock concerts where the pot smoke was so thick you wondered if you might not have just paid twenty bucks to listen to someone's scratched record turned up real high. Not many of the kids could relate. Willy put his helpers in charge of keeping the well filled with ink, and scraping the gunk off the printing drum with a stick. Only Willy ever got to turn the crank.

When Willy came down to the main floor of the factory - which he did about four times a shift to deliver printed slats to the machine lines - it was like some celebrity just rolled in from a whirlwind tour. Willy half-slid, half-walked down the wooden ramp with his big black wheelbarrow rocking from side to side, and the whole place turned just like someone had sounded a trumpet. Some of the guys sneered, some of them laughed, all the machine girls holstered their wire cutters whenever they saw him coming, a couple of the older men just shook their heads, and one of the really old geezers cried every time he saw Willy. It was the stars on his boots that made them turn. Not that they could see them from that far away, but, and this is the strange part, everyone swore they could *feel* them. What do stars feel like? Well, after the trumpets blaring when Willy bounced through the doorway on the upper landing, almost everyone, even the half-deaf guy who'd been running the arm saws for twenty years and more, swore there was this twinkling vibration in the air, not really a sound but a sensation. One of the kids said Willy was wearing spurs, but he wasn't. It was them stars. There were seventeen of them sprinkled across those blue boots, some so dim you could only see them by the space you imagined they took up in the blue. They started showing up shortly after Willy got the job. The first time one of the foremen saw one he thought maybe there might have been a mud swallow nest up in the print shop and Willy just got bird shit all over his boot. But those stars kept showing up, at no particular time, not like they were marking the years or anything. Once a cluster of three popped up all at once, and even though everyone in the shop was on the lookout - like you'd think they gave a prize or something for spotting new stars on Willy's boots, just like in astronomy - by the time one of the bundlers noticed them, their points were almost worn off. But the old guy who cried swore they weren't there the day before. Two of the line girls even got to pulling hair and scratching each other's faces over who noticed them first. Then the guy they had to drag up to the print room swore he was the first one to see them. Everyone, even the big bosses up in the glassed offices, knew those stars meant something.

Dolores, who wore cheap sandals on her feet and fought with her foreman at least three times a week about whether or not sandals were protective footwear, started the rumors back in 1974 when she first came to work. She liked Willy, even if she thought he'd stuck his head in a few too many paint barrels. "One star for each gook he killed. There keep being more because he keeps remembering. Flashbacks, that's what it is." That's what Dolores thought. No matter that Willy came to work at the box factory right out of high school, no matter that with his leg the Army wouldn't have considered him for a desk job and the Coast Guard recruiter asked him who the hell he thought he was, Captain Ahab?

Johnny Forklift, one of maybe three guys in the factory who knew Willy from high school and the only one who'd legally changed his name to fit his job, couldn't understand all the attention Willy got, even though he too stopped whatever he was doing every time Willy thumped down the ramp. But mostly, Johnny liked giving Willy a bad time. Like the day Johnny picked Willy's wheelbarrow right out of his hands with his forklift truck and dumped the whole thing, the beautiful red *California Beets* slats and all, off the loading dock and into the mud outside. Johnny laughed for days about that. Three of the machine girls gave him the "what for" about how cruel he was and then helped Willy pick up all the ruined slats. But it took a fourth to help lift the wheelbarrow back up onto the deck. No one thought of wheeling it around to the side ramp and through the main door. Johnny figured Willy was just trying to get more attention, the way he stood there helpless with those big eyes while four of the girls did all his work.

"He's got seventeen stars on his boots 'cuz that's how many brain cells he's got left after sniffing all that ink!"

"Well then why's he keep gettin' more?" Dolores screamed back at Johnny. "Everyone knows brain cells don't regenerate!" That shut Johnny up.

Willy wasn't much of a talker. He never was able to connect all the words in a way that meant much of anything. The words made sense by themselves, but when Willy strung them together and his lips started flapping and he started bouncing up and down on his bad leg and his eyes gushed water, well, who could listen to him then? Even if he did make sense, which he didn't, who cared? Even the machine girls who liked him couldn't stifle their laughter, but that just made Willy talk louder, and got him even more agitated so he started hitching his shoulder up into his ear and swiping at his nose so hard you'd wonder if he wasn't going to tear it clean off. No, he wasn't much of a talker, but he talked a lot.

Willy liked the girls, the machine girls with their wire cutters and big, greasy forearms, the slat girls with their hair tied back and their hands flying across the chutes. He once told one of the slat girls to quit sweating, she was going to make his ink run, and she accused him of flirting with her. She even called in one of the foremen and said she was being harassed. The way she said it it sounded like "hair-assed." Willy ran back to the print shop like a wounded rat and didn't show his face till the next day's shift. That got the slat girl a lot of grief. Some of the production lines ran out of Willy's slats and just plain shut down. Of course, no one thought to go up to the print room and grab a handful of slats. Without Willy, well, what could you do? It wouldn't have been like you were crossing union lines or anything, but the print shop was all Willy's.



While the rest of the shop screamed away, crunching slats and squealing over wire braids, Willy did the three-legged waltz up in the print shop. Once he slid the big wooden door closed there wasn't much sound could get through but a faint hum, or maybe a snap like a fly getting crunched when one of the bundles got dropped off the forklift because Johnny was doing four-wheel drifts around the corners. The floors up in the print shop were dark and soft with oil, so even Willy shoosh-shooshed when he walked. If you didn't watch him and just listened, you might think he was graceful.

Fall harvest was pretty much done, and Willy liked this time, when the evenings were crisp and he had to put his coat on halfway through the shift. It gave him a warm, safe feeling to be all alone in the print shop, with no rush to get the work out. The bosses even encouraged him to take longer breaks, told him he could go to the bathroom any time he wanted. That made him laugh, since he had his own bathroom off the print shop, but he knew as well as they did that when he was working hard he sometimes wouldn't take time no matter how tight his bladder got. It was a point of pride.

Willy kept a big chunk of chrome in the bathroom to use as a mirror. He said it was a fender off an old Harley-Davidson, and no one had been able to prove him wrong because it was just a ragged fragment. Willy liked the smell of it, all exhaust and road grit on its backside. Sometimes he would spit on it to give the chrome a good shine, then he would check his face for new imperfections. During the winter it helped to pass the time. And he knew himself to be one of the most imperfect human beings on earth. He didn't mind being imperfect; most people were. In fact, if he was feeling good, he might admit he wasn't half-bad looking. He had the hollow face of an addict, but beautiful cheekbones that stuck out like red Christmas baubles, and skin so thin you could see the blood coursing beneath it. Willy's was a technicolor face. His hazel eyes were large and teary, but not so he looked wounded. What people liked most about him though, was that he always looked surprised, like his eyes might burst from their sockets. What Willy liked most about himself was his mouth. Even as a child his mother's friends had teased him about how pretty his mouth was. Like maybe it should have been a girl's. It was his lips. They were full and rich and perfect, even if they did cover a bunch of crooked teeth.

Willy reached behind the toilet and retrieved a small bottle of paint and a brush, like the kind a kid would use to paint model airplanes or cars. He shook the bottle, then set it on the back of the toilet. Balancing on his good leg, he jerked the boot half off his foot, teetered a moment, then jerked the boot again and fell hard against the wall. He jammed the boot's heel between the corner of the open toilet lid and the seat and with a few grunts was able to wrench it off without breaking anything. As he caught his breath,

Willy spit on the chrome and watched as the yellow mass slowly rolled off the bottom edge. With one knee on the toilet seat, he swiped at the fender with his forearm and looked hard into the mirror. Yeah, he wasn't bad looking at all. The fall was his best time, when the light wasn't so bright through the clearstories of the shop, when the shadows weren't so sharp. Bright lights made no apologies to the ragged surface of his face.

"Ya don't put Waterford Crystal in the hands of a leper," his mother had remarked when he asked if he could buy a new coat for graduation.

"Ya got them blue boots, Willy," his daddy comforted. "Ain't nobody got boots like them. Ya got every right to walk proud."

It was almost like his father had forgotten that Willy was half cripple, that his leg was shaped like a capital "L" with a hangdog tail.

Willy opened the paint and with sure strokes, before the tears ran off his face, drew a star on the inside of the boot's heel. Yeah, he had every right to walk proud. He blew the lacquer dry and cleaned his brush. Because of the angle of his foot and the closeness of the bathroom, he had to fight just as hard to get the boot on as he did to take it off. He whacked his elbow pretty good against the doorknob and almost ended up with his head in the sink. He tucked his jeans into the boot and, because there wasn't much feeling left in his foot, stomped a couple times just to make sure it was on.

Willy blew his nose and tossed the tissue into the toilet. He licked his lips and tilted his head, grinning at himself in the chrome fender. He shouldered the door open and faced the empty, silent print room. He hefted the polished arms of his wheelbarrow. *Sea Bass-Pacific* was what his 250 slats said. He couldn't believe someone was stupid enough to ship sea bass in wire bound boxes, but after he thought about it he figured it was just someone's idea of a joke, or maybe the name of a company. Or maybe the bass was canned. He'd used a new ink for the job, a pretty sky blue, like the crayon you would use if you were six years old and someone told you to color the summer.

As he slid the ramp door open, the smells of exhaust and woodchips filled his nostrils. If he were a boy sitting down to his Christmas dinner he couldn't have been happier. He stood for a moment on the upper landing, poised like a basestealer watching the pitcher, waiting for the lull in concentration that might trigger his thumping entrance.

"Damn! Number five down! Number five down!"

A couple whistles punctuated the rhythmic slap of wood on wood, the rasp of wire on wire.

"Yeah!" Dolores yelled.

Willy saw his moment. He stepped first with his bad leg, and even laughed to himself that he called it his bad leg. Hell, hadn't his *bad* leg been responsible for all the good in his life? At least since he turned sixteen. Yeah. He steadied the wheelbarrow and the crisp slats that screamed *Sea Bass-Pacific*. Thump.

Dolores waved at him. One of the old guys on the line shook his head, spit on the floor, and reached for the pack of cigarettes rolled tight in his t-shirt sleeve. He couldn't smoke them in the shop, but got some little pleasure just from touching them and rubbing his fingers over his lips. Johnny Forklift slid his machine around a corner and slammed into a stack of boxes, knocking them back onto the line. He pretended not to notice. He jumped up on the seat of his forklift, sticking his head through the protective roll-cage and grinning up at Willy.

"He-e-e-re's Willy!" he screamed. "He-e-e-re's Willy!" He tapped a beat on the roll-cage, then flung his arms wide.

Thump. Willy slowly descended the ramp. He stiffened at Johnny's voice, then threw back his shoulders and took another step. Thump. The barrow tipped and its wheel skidded to one side. Willy's beautiful slats shook -no, they started to dance, but there were so many different tunes playing that slats bumped into slats, twisted and stood on end, and pretty soon some tumbled from the stack. Willy's face tightened, screwed up like some terrified child's face. If skin could scream Willy's face would have shouted down the whole shop. He stepped hard to one side with his bad leg, struck the oiled boards with his heel and folded onto the boot leather, but the leather wouldn't hold, it wouldn't hold! The ramp was shiny, wet with something, and Willy's leg slid out from under him. He twisted against the wheelbarrow, refusing to let go, and just like he was dancing a tango, just like a big bird dancing he pulled the wheelbarrow upright with one more step back into the empty space beyond the edge of the ramp. For a moment he thought he might just float there, like Wiley Coyote when he runs out of road. He took another step in the air, silent and painless, and broke into a wide grin as the floor rushed at his back. The wheelbarrow slammed into his face and slats went whisking across the floor.

Dolores was the first one there and she tore the wheelbarrow off Willy's face and chest. She kicked the *Sea Bass-Pacific* slats away and knelt at Willy's side. She put her hand on his chest to comfort him, but she had to turn away when she saw his face; his mouth had been ripped open all the way to his ear and his upper jaw was smashed halfway to his throat. He heaved and spit blood at her.

"Willy, it's Dolores." She didn't even look at him. "They're gonna get somebody for ya, Willy. It's Dolores, I'm not gonna hurt ya."

Johnny Forklift came running. "Christ, he ain't dead, is he? Naw, he'll be okay. He'll be okay. Oh, but Jesus God, will ya look at him? He's so damn ugly now - like he wasn't ugly before - how we gonna work with the bastard? Makes me sick just to look at him."

"Is he gonna die?" the old geezer asked. "He ain't gonna die, is he?"

Several of the line girls came running, and one of them screamed, "He's dying, he's dying!"

"Like you're gonna miss him?" Johnny mocked.

Betty, one of the machine girls, the only one who had tattoos on both her arms, knelt at Willy's feet. "Well, look-ee here," she whispered.

"Ah, I seen that one when he was up on the ramp!" Johnny bragged.

"A new star. I ain't never seen one so bright before." Betty passed her hand over the star, the way a child would test a flame.

"Tell us, Willy, tell us, Willy, what are all them stars for? All them stars on your boots, what are all them stars for, Willy?"

He spit more blood at Dolores, who still had her hand on his chest, not looking at him. Willy rolled his head and moaned.

"What do the stars mean, Willy?"

"Shh! Shh! He's trying to talk! Shh!"

Willy breathed real heavy and licked along the jagged wound in his cheek. He looked at all the faces staring at him, at Johnny and the old guy, at Betty and her hooked nose, at the slot girls, and at the back of Dolores's head. "It ain't the stars what matter, you idiots, it's all that blue space in between." Now that they could hardly bear to look at him, they were listening to him. "Don't you see? I'm runnin' out of blue space. And I can't do nothing to stop it. It's sorta like counting backwards." He coughed and tried to laugh, but no one could see the joke through his torn lips.

"Why don't he just make littler stars?" One of the bosses was on the floor by now, and he threw his hands up in the air.

"I think he means, I think he means ..." Betty struggled with the idea. "... I think he means he's been doing subtraction, or something." She shook her head and took a friend's arm.

"That's it?" Johnny Forklift screamed. "That's it? That's the big mystery? Geez Louise! You all waited twenty years for nothing! Ha! I should have greased the ramp way back when and saved you all that wondering!"



It was the old geezer who kicked Johnny's legs out from under him, but it was one of the slat girls who did the real damage. I guess she broke his nose pretty good, even sent a splinter of bone up through one of his eyes. Willy and Johnny rode in the ambulance together to the hospital.

Willy thought he was going to die, but he didn't. One of his lungs was punctured, a few ribs were broken, his face was a mess and always would be, and Willy wouldn't be back to work for a few months, but he wasn't going to die. Everyone knew he'd be back. And so would his boots. That's what most folks wanted to talk about. They all pitched in and had an arrangement of white carnations sent to him so they'd be waiting when he got back from surgery.

Willy might have worried that the girls wouldn't smile at him anymore, that the old geezer wouldn't cry and salute his imaginary flag every time Willy thumped into the shop, that the big bosses wouldn't be so lenient about his time in the bathroom, but that wasn't how it was gonna be. No, weren't nothing gonna change. Except maybe now that Johnny had to wear a patch over one eye he wouldn't give Willy such a bad time. And maybe the stars would get smaller. We all hoped they would. If Willy was worried about that blue, we were, too.

**The Cusp of August 9-10**

Flinging myself through the tight tunnel  
buckets of sweet liquorish buzzfly juices  
and hoarfrosted fruits  
Careening forth from petty flares  
my frayed organ of tasks and lists  
had hardened and cracked  
beneath the heat lamp of a room  
The beggar was forgotten and not missed, yet found  
unfortunately  
in the form of a Slurpee'd lipped boy  
with not a want nor need in this country-fair town

New Art cloudscares in the sky keeping their rightful color  
Or bleeding through their bedding  
obscure menstrual sheets  
And the moon whispering secret passwords or  
spells of invisibility to a certain lamppost,  
It was not a toenail clipping nor a fruit rind nor a silhouette of a scimitar  
The moon was more like psychic scum remaining after a prophetic killing dream  
Yeah, it looked that strange and unreal  
(but of course I've left out the ocean beneath it  
and the dirt-sand beneath that)  
It was sliding around her torso  
that lemon juice tattoo and its beacon of a sidekick  
The birds of rock  
smashing and devouring those horned creatures of stone  
silently and still  
A shoeless adventurer  
legs glowing red behind us

Oh, and the super party we were going to have!,  
to give the bread and wine of ourselves  
so that they would become one in the bosom of our friendship  
The curses were poltergeists flying through the tavern smoke  
the jinxs and bad ju-jus crashed our soiree  
All went home hungry  
but I went home drunk  
And yes, I won two out of three pool games  
(a gamesman's nod to the Boar's Head boy)  
but I was so pissed at life  
and Life  
I kiss Its ass and hate It for that  
like any slave would her master



### **Where I Am Going**

The car is working okay.  
The highway is wet from rain,  
and the trees on the sides of the road  
are wet. My cup of coffee  
spilled a while back, and I need some more.

I remember there is a truck stop  
not far ahead. I have an image  
of a big parking lot, big trucks  
and big logs. But I could be mistaken.  
Maybe it was a dream. Maybe  
it was another state.

The highway goes into a tunnel,  
huge mouth without teeth.  
I think in the darkness  
of where I am going  
and of what the weather will be like.  
For now I am in the tunnel,  
and the car is working okay.

### **The Tunnel**

The tunnel echoes summer of '61  
hot rods  
Lucky Dills,  
the ghost train of '29  
shadowing us, roaring,  
a candy apple red Ford  
(Somebody's girl,  
always somebody's girl -  
Lucky Dills  
whatever happened to Lucky Dills  
swaggering red-haired  
heavy across hallways  
drag racing the tunnel end to end)

Huge  
we become  
lost in car lights  
radios revving engines  
dancing North  
to Alaska with Johnny  
Horton, Elvis,  
all those guys.

\*\*\*\*\*

(To escape rules  
and adults in 1961  
we drove to the end of the road  
or nearly so-  
after 8:00, the ferry quit running.  
With hardly any cars coming

the tunnel, eerie, was ours  
for the evening - all ours!)

\*\*\*\*\*

Horn honking was a tunnel  
greeting for fun  
that fades  
before the crush  
of visitors to the beach  
swelling the population  
to numbers the chambers  
of commerce extol in 1994.

Dank, the tunnel musty  
like Fort Columbia  
dark moldering shut off  
cells like dungeons  
does not seem safe,  
newcomers say,  
unwise unsafe unwelcome  
dangerous.

To travel solitary into dark  
valley of shades tunneling under the hill  
from one state to another  
before passing by the nude beach  
to sunny Chinook

is danger

ever beckoning death  
by drowning in the pond  
or by suicide at the trailer court  
where my student playing

Russian Roulette  
shot out the back of his head  
while drinking with a buddy  
(a lectern seems so little  
to remember him by).

We ask for guarantees  
so the highway department  
supplies men in white  
operating on step ladders  
hinged like drying racks  
while a single lane of traffic  
inches by the jack hammers  
echoing like souped-up dragsters  
waiting for the flag to drop.

The men install neon lights  
hop scotching in orderly rows  
down the center of the ceiling.

After a summer class  
letting out at near dark in Astoria  
the sunset becomes the ever golden  
hope just at the other end  
of the tunnel.

Over the bridge toward the hill  
the lights reflect alien orange  
devouring beast of Aladdin's Cave  
the tunnel  
transforming us on our journeys  
into that which we may  
(despite cold and drips)  
with good luck and music  
become.

**Of my Bed Being Turned into  
a Sacrificial Altar in this  
Abandoned House by the Bay**

It's barely December and already my hands ache. On the other side  
of the curtain the cat stalks the cold  
for mice who still think they own this place. Perhaps  
they do, but I figure ownership's ninety-percent size.  
He'll eventually catch one to play with only to cry  
incredulously at its death.  
By morning he'll have laid the stiff body at the foot of my bed.  
I'll want to tell the cat that the only man who believes he's god  
on this god-forsaken peninsula  
is that son-of-a-bitch who pays me forty cents a bushel  
to push through the sloughs and rake my fingers through the muck  
and the crabs of his oyster beds.  
Words are meaningless. I'll just get out of bed, and he'll barely  
twitch a whisker to yawn  
as I lift the mouse up by its tail to toss it outside  
into the grass still bent in the frost.

**old woman**

sixteen steps: put out the trash  
up both staircases  
once for exercise  
once for mail  
out of my cocoon  
twice a day

morning full of letters  
prayers  
paper  
and only one cup of instant  
Carol calls at 7:30  
worry if she's late

twenty-nine holiday cards  
only  
I sent a hundred thirteen  
thirty-two and seventy-seven cents  
just for stamps

lunch alone  
watch the cat and think  
oh, of when I walked the pram to the bay  
three miles or more  
and back  
if the day was fine

afternoon for soaps  
tv people are friends  
younger, made-up, well-briefed talkers  
those old people downstairs don't like me  
they have their how do you say it cliques

evening given over  
other people's talk  
long-distance  
Jim twice a week  
Evie on Tuesday  
Charles Sunday and Wednesday  
always ask if I may call again  
no, no will not come to visit  
I'd be too much trouble in their busy week

radio talk shows  
tv talk shows  
same as truth  
it must be  
and what a state the country's in

a long time ago  
before father-in-law  
uncle, aunt and sister  
came to my house  
to slowly die  
I rode upside down in waxed wing airplanes  
and didn't lose my lunch

in the everyday  
when the children were at home  
before marriage inverted  
I lived in Florida half the year  
smoked cigarettes in public  
cruised yachts

with future short  
cataracts absorb  
or reflect  
to do is  
to dream for them all



**Near the Chalice of St. John the Baptist**

How could I not be beautiful  
and intolerable as the two  
della Robbia choir stalls  
holding down all day the darkening  
upstairs at the Museum of the Opera  
of the Duomo? In touching relief  
that is not desire, that is

like a baptismal rose, closed  
at the beginning, the immaculately  
stained white ground,

they are at every turning, ambient  
with singers, dancers, cherubim;  
(how once they brushed this air, all singing,

all envisioned as something  
close at hand, some thing  
unattainable).

**Baltimore Catechism**

Why do they do these things?  
This morning I dreamt a brash  
Boy of ten stood  
On the front pew at Mass and  
Shook his finger at the Taber-  
nacle (as I sat sternly by  
In stiff Cambric and Brocade  
The Soul of Piety, Unafraid  
But inwardly scandalized)  
And demanded if  
He lives let  
Him come down  
A sign  
I demand  
A sign and  
He replied by stop-  
ping my thick heart and  
I  
Fell through webby choking  
Curtains to Eternity to my  
Damnation and woke to  
A grey July dawn my  
Wife breathing in  
Regular rhythms  
Beside me.

**SUM**

*to Clyde Rice with great love*

Who cares  
whether I believe  
the old myths, folk lore,  
Old Testament,  
Father O'Malley  
the President  
Mother

it doesn't  
matter

whether  
I consider  
history a tale of shame  
best forgotten it is not  
relevant.

What matters is that I must  
strut my brief hour on the stage  
before the backdrop of the past  
vast intricate rich  
known

Known by no one  
but by all known  
known not only now  
but before known  
known by that unnumbered chorus  
statesmen artists poets  
looming behind me,  
above whose voices  
my voice must rise  
or I with a puckish smile  
must upstage.

I am individual  
but not alone.  
I am the bright point  
on the thrown shaft  
of History.

## **Travelling Eternity**

concentrating through the nervous clicking of time  
slowly the doctor centers all attention,

he who gives leave to the conscious  
presses the mind past lives

in lost thought  
of ancient mummies  
ticking bandages  
of mortified souls  
trapped in a tomb  
reeking wealth and beauty

gone next to the nuns  
who nurse wounds  
with blood-stained paws  
in soaked prayers,  
whispering for one more moment  
between the coma and a coffin

in the tick-tock in which all is remembered,  
where the doctor says it is not,  
he knows the hush-hush that they thought they kept

**Dynastic**

Quite suddenly as we were bending over  
the funerary remains and mummy case  
of Amen-hotep III  
And minutely examining the small, dainty sandals  
with their golden bells of his tiny sister  
Nefertari - which glittered still proudly -  
Yet not so much so, we thought,  
as did the calmly arranged features  
of her grandfather in the tenth degree  
Seti I  
Whose jewelled fragility was infinite among  
his scented pleats and hieratic folds,  
For quite without warning (As a commentary?)  
There was a soundless roar  
with a blinding flash, white hot, and  
somehow inconsolable.  
And then there was volting that not even a  
mutatiori could survive.

## Hunting Mrs. Eljinholme's

When my father had things on his mind he would not eat dinner with the rest of his family. Instead, he would go into the living room to be by himself. There, he would eat in the dark while sitting beside the fire. If anyone could be with him, it was only his dog. I remember such an evening, in early November when I was twelve. The house was cold. Rain had begun to fall against the windows. We could hear it on the roof.

"Uncle Jim said we were goin' t'get rain," my father called from the other room. "When it's goin' t'rain he says his tail pulls off to the right," and he started to laugh.

My mother smiled. "Your father and that dog always like their own jokes best."

From the kitchen I could hear the sound of Jim chasing my father's fork around his plate. Uncle Jim was my father's dog. Jim had been with my father longer than anyone else in our family, including my mother.

I think Jim represented to my father that part of himself that he actually liked, the kind and rough and happy part. And he used this good part of himself to communicate with the rest of his family. He used to say that Jim was almost human, although he got along best with him because he wasn't.

My father's rocking chair squeaked as he got up. I listened to the thump of his wooden leg as he came toward us in the kitchen. He put his hand on my shoulder as he passed. "Hunt with us in the mornin'?" My mouth was full so I nodded my head and smiled. Hunting was something I enjoyed.

The rain had drawn my father out of the stupor in which he had fallen. His talking to us was a sure sign of that. And he was talking clearly. Mostly my father talked inside his mouth, as if it was more important for him to hear what he had to say than for anyone else. He would barely move his lips, so when he spoke he often mumbled. He did not like to repeat himself, so when he spoke we all listened carefully.

"Jim and I found an old orchard way up back the old place. We should be all right." He meant it was a remote enough place for us to probably not get caught.

We never did hunt for sport in our family, not as much as we did for food. The day the state began to regulate which days people could and could not hunt was the day we became a family of poachers.

My father had been waiting for rain so he could go hunting. Rain softened the leaves and helped to hide his clumsy steps.



Near the orchard, I followed my father through the woods. We passed through a stand of alder, and despite the rain the woods were filled with light. There were not many leaves on the trees, and the rain fell easily between the bare limbs, and it splashed noisily on the ground. Sword fern and huckleberry and salal were growing against the hills. In this we hid ourselves. While my father scanned the trails below us, I rolled myself into a tight ball and fell asleep.

I had never hunted with my father prior to the time he was disabled. I think this is why he chose me to go along with him, rather than either of my older brothers. My father worked as a faller for Crown-Zellerbach when I was born. When I was six he was injured while filling in as a choker-setter. At the time of the accident he said he heard a voice cry "JUMP!", and without thinking he jumped just before the haul-back line broke. The cable lashed into his legs. Had he not jumped when the voice told him to, he would have been cut in half at the waist. As it was, he lost his right leg just above the knee.

The voice returned to him later, in other dangerous situations, but still he did not know where it came from. His best guess was that it was the voice of his grandmother. He told me that when he died he would try to show up as a voice in my head to watch over me.

Curled up there, near the orchard, my father grabbed my leg and squeezed. When I awoke, he and Jim were looking down at me. My father held a finger over his expressionless lips. He pointed at something in the brush that I could not find. He took a chance and fired one shot.

Our eyes spotted no movement. We heard no sound of rustling brush. We moved anxiously to the spot. When we got there my father's head dropped low on his shoulders, and he cussed inside his mouth.

The deer was too small. By my father's own standards it was a waste of life. "I won't leave it," he said.

He was ashamed enough by what he'd done to not allow me to watch him gut the animal. He even pushed Jim harshly away. While my father dressed the deer, Jim and I sat watching the woods, but we also listened to the sound of my father's hands, feeling their way through the wet body, separating the deer from its warm insides.

My father was a man of few words. Through his actions and his hard, reproachful looks, he tried to teach common sense to me and my two brothers. He believed that if we had common sense we would be able to teach ourselves anything. He once told me that sooner or later we all become victims of ourselves, that only common sense would determine how long it took.

When leaving the woods my father made me go ahead. I carried his gun while he carried the deer. I think he did not want any eyes upon him.

The day should have been over. The hunting, the waiting, the walking had been enough. Not to mention the shame of killing the deer. But then, so suddenly, as if they had dropped out of the trees, two dogs attacked Jim. Both were German shepherds, one much larger than the other. Jim didn't have a chance. They had him down on his back.

Immediately my father dropped the deer and ran hobbling to save Jim. The dogs bit him on the hands when he tried to break them up. He tried using his wooden leg, but it was awkward and he lost his balance. He fell down and quickly got up again. The woods were filled with the sound of animals tearing at one another. The small shepherd backed away when the larger one got a tight hold on Jim's chest. Then he began to shake him. My father withdrew his knife and beat on the dog's head with the handle end, but the dog would not let go. Jim began to howl desperately. That's when my father turned the knife around and stabbed into the big dog's shoulder.

Both shepherds ran off, the larger one limping and coughing. Jim remained on the ground, lying on his side, still barking and growling as if the fight were still going on.

"Good boy," my father said calmly. He stroked Jim carefully, soothing and quieting him. "Good boy." He kept talking to his dog. Tears began to surface in his eyes. I think he did not try to save Jim because he knew he was dying. He continued to sit on the ground, leaning over his dog, stroking and soothing, until he was sure Jim's breathing had stopped. Then he began to cry, almost silently. He began to choke, and the crying shook his body.

When he got up I offered to carry the deer, but he still would not allow it. He could not carry both, although for awhile he tried. He decided to bury Jim there in the woods. He wrapped the dog in his shirt. He placed his hat and his knife in the hole on top of Jim's body. Then he slowly pushed the dirt in with his hands.

Before he could finish, the smaller shepherd returned. She stood twenty feet away, quietly growling. She began very slowly to approach us, one step at a time. Then she stopped. She held one leg tensely off the ground. My father stood up. He reached for his rifle. As he put the gun to his shoulder a voice went off in my head. "No!"

But my father did not hear the voice. I think he chose not to. He chose to pull the trigger instead. Then something stung him in the chest. He looked at me, troubled but not frightened. He stared at me, and his breathing became strained. His eyes began to close. He looked at the shepherd lying on the ground. It was wheezing and puffing.

My father's face was filled with anguish. He swallowed once, very hard. Then his life left him. And his body twisted as it fell.

I sat next to him, and with him I held tightly onto his gun. I remember searching the woods with my eyes, hunkered down low, listening carefully to the rain, waiting for my father's voice to sound inside my head.

*Tess Jacobs*



**Blackberry Brambles**

We did mushrooms,  
then walked the woods

with Boone. These woods  
ran right through your neighborhood.

Deer hung out there  
and gargantuan

drunken blackberry thickets  
lurched every which way. Boone,

exuberant sniffer,  
demolished underbrush

and murdered imaginary animals.  
Leaves scattered. It was October,

evening. Earlier that day we'd driven  
all over town, part of the stream

of humans and machines. Spencer's Butte  
was blue above buildings. Kids

did weird stuff  
in the street. Black cats



and jack-o-lanterns adorned storefronts  
in pagan celebration

of the seasons,  
the rhythms

of the Earth  
so powerful

they pull us all  
into the dance.

The woods  
ended at the cemetery

on the hill, where we sat and watched  
the sun disappear.

Weeks later,  
on the phone,

you told me they were gone,  
those woods we walked.

Machines had leveled them.  
So. That particular story

is history.

But I remember you saying,

on our walk back from the graveyard,  
that civilization's a blip

on the big screen.

And I remember the way the woods felt

And I know

that it's practically impossible

to eradicate blackberry brambles.



**This book**

Aspiring writer that I was,  
lover of nature that you were,  
this handcrafted gift  
of dried ferns and purple lupines  
pressed into the cover of a book  
seems the perfect marriage  
of our pasts.

But something about it all  
makes me a bit uneasy.  
These dead things,  
ferns like herring bones,  
small wildflowers decapitated,  
their blue and golden petals scattered.

And then the empty pages inside,  
all white  
of nothingness,  
this whole thing you offer  
like a corpse  
that dies,  
    and dies again.

## **The Dead**

Each loss  
is bigger and takes more space in your life  
than the people still here.  
Have you noticed that?  
Black holes develop in the fabric of your life  
that fray away energy and thought.

They're complete now  
beginning and end as definition  
like bookends  
that enclose the life, refine it to narrative.  
All that they did now makes sense.  
Nothing like the ragged chaos we still live.

Even your dad, that son of a bitch,  
got better by being dead.  
As a finished work he looks better than he ever did  
while he was alive.

And I've known others, careless cruel lives  
that doubled back on themselves  
like the ink blots of Rorschach.  
Those of us still living can't see the pattern yet  
or how it will reflect and reverse  
to be beautiful as some dark butterfly.

I'm writing to tell you the cat died.  
He was born in your bed  
and died sleeping on the top of my piano.  
This is a small but elegant death.

That's it.

The dead are finished, completed,  
good mannered as ladies  
who always remember  
their gloves and clean hankies.

We living still stumble forward  
looking for some sense in all this.

## **Blue Boy**

Blades, sharp and gleaming in the winter sun, reflected on the blue ice covering the lake. They were skating blades, shining silver in the cool air, throwing off glints of light into the cold, frozen depths of the ice which they had glazed over moments ago. They now stood motionless, their wearers bent over the scarred ice with dead greying tree branches in their chilled hands. The decaying branches scraped over the ice, sending up sprays of ice fine as powder, light as snow. The branches thumped dully on the ice, filling the placid, solitary lakeshore with the sound of earnest effort and desperation. All at once, the branches fell to the ice and lay there like two rough corpses. Their users sat back on their blades and looked at each other in despair.

"It's no use! He's frozen fast down there!"

The hearer began to weep and to press her hands and face on the pale, numb ice, peering down to its shadowy dark bottom. There, deep, deep below, a tiny blue face gazed back at hers with a look of frigid terror frozen firmly in place.

## Christmas Night

The child wakes.  
He shivers.  
Winds howl.  
Hail and snow  
Beat upon the earth.

Wiping their hands, the aunts come in from the kitchen,  
Exclaiming that turkey and left-overs are put away,  
The table cleared, pans set to soak, and the dishes done.

The uncles nod, mutter weather matters, clutch holiday  
Whiskies, groan, and abandon all attempts to chat.  
The dog, sighing in sleep, dreams of bones and summer play.

Marie cocks her head and turns. What's that?  
It doesn't sound like wind or sleet or snow.  
Is someone crying in the trees...a lost dog...a cat?

The dog lifts his ears, listens, and in one slow  
Movement, stretches out again to sleep a dog's sleep.  
The aunts sing. All grow silent and doze in the fire's glow.

The infant mourns.  
He trembles.  
Angels and the holy mother  
Are puzzled;  
They are unable to shield  
The grieving child,  
They cannot  
Stop his trembling.

There it is again, Marie said.  
Someone is crying in the trees.  
No, the uncles said, It's a winter breeze.  
Now, Marie, time for sleep. Time to go to bed.

**Peter Iredale**

The rusted corroded  
barnacle-encrusted

iron rib-spikes  
of the old wrecked

ship stick up  
out of the ground

this morning and the subfreezing  
wind lifts sand

and ripples the glittering  
saltwater puddles inside the massive

iron skull  
that was the ship's

prow. The sun  
is a sharp sword

that flashes over the breakers  
and pierces

a million places at once.  
And the wreck and the beach and the ocean

shine and burn  
in the icy wind.

**Falcon Point,  
May 28, 1990**

Up where I'm sitting  
watching the vastness of the ocean,  
it's a beautiful spring evening.  
Wild lavender irises  
cover the steep hillside.  
Once I saw a whale  
from this cliff.

But 200 feet below me  
there's a man standing  
alone on a rock  
with a fishing pole,  
casting.

The waves, like luck,  
come in sporadic rushes,  
crashing and slapping  
the walls of rock around him,  
sending up spray,  
then falling  
and receding back  
into the sea.

I'm thinking:  
"How'd he get down there?"  
since it's almost a straight drop  
from where I am.



And I'm also thinking:  
"Man, he must be mad  
about fishing ...  
or he doesn't give a damn  
about his life."

The water is deep  
all around him.  
One huge wave  
that knocks him  
off his feet

And there won't  
be a thing  
for him to do  
but drown.

issue

No rain today. What use is rain? No rain.  
The airwaves spoke. Opinion polls were raised,  
Campaigns bought thirty-second spots. No rain.  
Good drivers put their slogans on their bumpers.  
They drove and did their duty. No more rain.  
Complaints have come from factories out east;  
Umbrella-makers stand to lose their jobs.  
Weigh those few hundred jobs against the rest,  
The millions, who find rain most inconvenient:  
"There will be no more rain. Make parasols."

ablution

Sunset inside a cup of wine. The crowd  
Is babbling beside the purple waves  
And shouting as the bodies arc and sway.  
Diana fiddles on her milky strings;  
She drinks the last glass of deep blush in pay  
But then brings out her stores of Burgundy  
(You must taste this yourself sometime, and see).  
Friends, sip each other's secrets! We've all night;  
Nor time nor timorous tomorrow-thoughts  
Dilute the Absolute Dance - our strength. A toast!



## Contributors

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SUSAN PAKENEN HOLWAY, longtime resident of Naselle, now lives in Oysterville. She is a writing instructor at CCC and the author of "Remember Where You Started From."

PHILIP HUCKINS is an art student at CCC. His drawings, prints, and assemblages are currently on display at Flying Barney's in Astoria.

RUSSEL HUNTER is a veterinarian in Knappa and serves as Chairman of the College Board at CCC. He has made many contributions to RAIN in the past.

TIM HURD is a resident of Warrenton where he owns a coffee roasting company. He is hoping to publish his first novel soon. He recently participated in a CCC fiction workshop.

TESS JACOBS first gained appreciation for the arts as a young child. She lives in Astoria and is a full-time student at CCC.

LANI JOHNSON currently teaches piano and voice, and writes in her spare time. She has previously published in *Writers* and *Voice of Portland* and has participated in a CCC poetry workshop.

TRACY KATHERINE lives in Astoria and works with the Moondles writing group. She recently participated in a CCC poetry workshop.

NANCY KEM has had her artwork shown throughout Oregon for over two decades and now has several collections at various institutions throughout the state. She has worked as an art instructor in Oregon secondary schools for 31 years, including 16 years at Astoria High. She now resides in Astoria and is a part-time student and instructor at CCC.

K. C. KILLINGSWORTH is a poet and song writer who has performed with his brother throughout the Northwest. He currently works as a postmaster in Oysterville.

BOB LEUNG moved from Hong Kong to the United States in 1971. He wrote his contributing work while living in Gearhart and working as an English teacher at Seaside High School from 1987 - 1990. He currently resides in San Francisco.

LINDEN is a full-time art student at CCC, pursuing her Bachelors Degree in Fine Arts. She has participated in a variety of local and national art shows in Oregon and California, winning awards at both the 1994 CCC Student Art Show and the SLAM Art Show.

KATHERINE LUCK was a winner in the Young Playwright's Festival Competition at the Portland Repertory Theatre and has published in *The Niche*, Portland High School's newspaper. She is a junior at Benson High School in Portland.

DAWN ANGEL LEA MICKELSON is a native of Astoria and a sometime student at CCC. She is a member of the local writing group Moondles.

PATRICK B. MUKELIC has previously published in the *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *New Mexico Humanities Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*. He currently teaches high school English and Humanities in Canby, Oregon.

ANNE SPLANE PHILLIPS began her creative writing at CCC in 1991, and was first published in the 1994 edition of *RAIN*. She is a counselor in Seaside.

DREW PISARRA has published in *Plasm*, *HOMOtire*, and *Tapestry*. He is a two time recipient of an Interdisciplinary Project Grant from the Metropolitan Arts Commission in Portland. He is working on a new solo experimental work for the Portland Art Museum and their upcoming biennial Celebration.

FREDERIC ROTHCHILD is a native Oregonian and retired Reed College music teacher who is in love with Astoria.

HANK SLANGAL is the current Linfield College academic advisor at CCC. He has held a variety of jobs over the years but prefers writing.



TIM SPROUL received his MFA from the University of Oregon in 1993 and has recently published three poems in *Talking River Review*. He currently works as an advertising copywriter in Seattle.

PATRICIA S. THOMAS writes with the Poetry Workshop at the Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland. She lives in Seaview where she makes miniature houses for collectors.

CHRISTINA THOMPSON was one of three finalists for the Mead High School Literary Contest sponsored by the Oregon Institute for Literary Arts. She is a senior at Astoria High School and a recent participant in a CCC fiction workshop.

PATRICK VALA-HAYNES is a published poet and playwright and freelances as a stage fight choreographer, most recently with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He lives in Portland.

JOHN WESTERMAN is a full-time student at CCC and was a participant in a recent CCC fiction workshop. He plans to continue his education in Portland.

M. WHITE, or Mysterious White, is from Seattle.

PETER EDWARD WILEY'S poetry appeared in *The New Yorker* in the thirties, during which time "Dynastic" was written. Peter is now a resident of Gearhart.

DONNA K. WRIGHT is a high school teacher living in Astoria. She has participated in many writing workshops, both as a student and teacher. She writes poetry and fiction.





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